

## Viewpoint

# Nigeria: Foreign Policy and Diplomatic Disarray<sup>1</sup>

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In recent years, Nigeria's foreign policy and diplomacy have been in disarray. Its role in international affairs has been on the decline, while its global influence has waned considerably. Nigeria conducts its diplomacy traditionally through three main channels — the United Nations (UN), the Commonwealth and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). In each of these three theatres of its diplomatic activities, Nigeria is no longer a key player. In the Commonwealth, where a Nigerian, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, is secretary-general, Nigeria remains on suspension on account of the execution of the nine Ogoni people in 1995 and Nigeria's refusal to heed Commonwealth's plea for clemency. Diplomatic relations with several key Commonwealth countries, such as Canada and even Britain, are at a very low level. The European Union (EU), including Britain, and the United States, have imposed limited but selective mandatory sanctions on Nigeria, including a virtual cessation of high-level official contacts between those countries and Nigeria. Recently, the next British Foreign Secretary, Mr. Robin Cook, denounced the military regime in Nigeria in such strong terms as are not normally associated with a British government. Air traffic between Nigeria and Britain remains suspended. Direct air links between Nigeria and the United States are severed, too.

At the United Nations, where Nigeria had been largely influential in the past, it is now treated with reserve. Several UN agencies, such as the Human Rights Commission and the International Labour Organisation (ILO), have had

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cause to denounce and criticise Nigeria for its human rights abuses. Only a few weeks ago, the official visit to Nigeria of the Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi, provided further ammunition for Nigeria's critics at the UN, where the Security Council pointedly queried Nigeria for receiving Gaddafi on an official visit in defiance of a UN ban on air travel with Libya. Nigeria's laconic defence of its action obviously did not impress the Security Council. Equally, relations between Nigeria and such multilateral financial institutions as the World Bank, the IMF and the Paris and London Clubs remain severely strained. New credits are not being extended to Nigeria on account of its failure to implement its economic reform programme fully. Nigeria's representatives at the UN, and in several Western capitals, are having a difficult time defending their government, particularly over widespread international criticism of its human rights records.

Africa has traditionally been regarded by Nigeria as the major centre of its diplomatic activities. But even here, Nigeria has suffered a major decline in its influence. It is no longer courted or even consulted by the key players in Africa. Nigeria had played a major role in the liberation struggles of South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Angola and Mozambique, including substantial financial and material assistance to those countries. It ought to enjoy some goodwill in those countries. But that is not the case. Today, Nigeria is practically in a situation of *persona non grata* with those countries. None of the leaders of these countries have in recent times visited Nigeria. While they maintain diplomatic relations with Nigeria, there are no high-level official bilateral contacts between them and this country. The South African President, Dr. Nelson Mandela, who has emerged as Africa's most respected and influential leader today, and his Southern African colleagues have virtually given up on Nigeria. There may still be some respect for Nigeria as a country, but none for its leaders. So, at the three concentric levels of Nigeria's diplomacy, Nigeria is being increasingly marginalised.

Three recent events in Africa have highlighted Nigeria's increasing international isolation — the crisis in Zaire, the Gaddafi visit, and the military take-over in Sierra Leone. In the case of Zaire, now Congo, Nigeria had always been a key player in the affairs of that country since its independence in 1960. Nigerian troops served with the UN forces in the Congo in the early sixties under a UN mandate to help restore order there. Nigeria's General Aguiyi-Ironsi once commanded UN forces in the Congo. The Balewa government exercised a major influence on UN operations in the Congo. Senior Nigerian diplomats like Francis Nwokedi, Ambassador Lawrence Anionwu, Ambassador Jolasoso and Geoffrey Amachree, who was UN Under-secretary-general in the Trusteeship Council, worked very closely

with the UN Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjold, and later U. Thant, and their senior staff, such as Cruise Conor O'Brien, Dayal and Andrew Cordier, to ensure full implementation of the UN mandate there.

But this time, when a fresh crisis erupted in the Congo, Nigeria was effectively shut out of the diplomatic manoeuvrings. There was no Nigerian official reaction to the unfolding drama there. Efforts to secure a diplomatic settlement of the crisis were spear-headed by South African President Nelson Mandela. A South African naval vessel provided the venue for the abortive meeting between Mobutu and Kabila. Yet, Lagos or Abuja are much nearer Kinshasa than Pretoria. In fact, Kinshasa is less than two-hour's flight from Lagos. Yet, the Nigerian government pretended to be totally disinterested in the future of a neighbour, the third largest and once the richest country in Africa, a country that shares its borders with eight other African countries and is bigger than Western Europe put together; a country that is home to over a million Nigerians. There was not a whimper from Nigeria regarding the momentous events in the Congo because it could neither defend Mobutu nor support Kabila. It has, through its own domestic policy, lost the moral high ground.

The second major diplomatic bungling by Nigeria was the recent state visit to Nigeria, at Nigeria's invitation, of the Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi, in the guise of Nigeria's new friend and ally. At the end of the visit, he was conferred with Nigeria's highest national honour, reserved for Nigeria's heroes. But Gaddafi is an international outcast without a friend (even in the Arab world), and the visit itself was in defiance and breach of a UN ban on air traffic with Libya. Nigeria's complicity with that visit in defiance of a UN embargo on Libya has been rightly condemned at the UN, and it is clearly detrimental to its international image. Besides, what has Gaddafi to offer Nigeria? Practically nothing in concrete terms except, perhaps, a couple of mosques. In 1982, Nigeria refused to attend the OAU summit in Tripoli following the refusal of Libya to withdraw its occupation forces from Chad, with which Nigeria shares its northern border. Nigeria had rejected a Libyan proposal to partition Chad between it and Nigeria. In fact, the manner of the visit, the arrogant manner in which Gaddafi treated his hosts, including his demand for a Moslem *jihad* in Nigeria, was most provocative and hardly in the interest of even his hosts. It was clearly calculated to inflame religious passions in Nigeria and further aggravate the existing domestic tensions in the country. It is to the credit of the maturity of Nigerians that Gaddafi's call for a religious warfare has been condemned and ignored by all of Nigeria's leaders, including the Moslems.

The third event which has tested Nigeria's diplomatic skills has been the overthrow of the civilian President of Sierra Leone, Mr. Tejan Kabbah, who Nigeria was under an obligation to defend. But the situation presents Nigeria with a moral dilemma, as it is itself under a military regime which has been in power for four years with no assurance or guarantee that the military will actually step down next year and hand over to a democratically elected government. Nigeria's ECOMOG troops have been despatched to Freetown to put down the coup. It is a move which has been rightly applauded, as the people of Sierra Leone should be assisted to stop the take-over of their country by military adventurers and bandits. But the questions are: are the people of Nigeria who have suffered equally terribly under military rule less deserving than the Sierra Leoneans of the restoration of civilian democratic rule in their own country? How can Nigeria support democracy abroad while denying it to its own people at home? How can the Nigerian military sponsor democracy in other foreign lands while subverting it in its own country? This is the cruel moral dilemma that Nigeria now faces as a result of its military intervention in Sierra Leone.

It is the same dilemma it faced in southern Africa, where it supported the liberation movements while at the same time denying its own people of their fundamental human rights.

It is this contradiction in Nigeria's foreign and domestic policy that is responsible for the inertia in Nigeria's foreign policy and the recent series of bunglings in its diplomacy. There is a clear conflict between its domestic and foreign policy, a situation that leads to diplomatic ineptitude and failures. No doubt, Nigeria wants good relations with its traditional friends and allies, particularly in Africa; but such relations are not possible in the light of the continuing concern internationally over Nigeria's human rights record. These countries are democracies where there is respect for the rule of law. Real friendship and political alliances can only be constructed on the basis of a mutuality of interests and shared values, which do not now exist between Nigeria and its traditional allies.

It is, perhaps, significant that Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim of the OAU, Chief Emeka Anyaoku of the Commonwealth Secretariat, and Mr. Kofi Annan of the UN are all respected African international civil servants who have, on several occasions, denounced creeping military dictatorships in Africa and human rights violations. Criticisms of Nigeria for its violations of human rights is not a gigantic international conspiracy as some of Nigeria's leaders argue foolishly. It is a clear signal that the international community, including

many African leaders, are no longer willing to put up with military dictatorships and gross violation of human rights.

In reaction to its increasing loss of influence and isolation by the international community, Nigeria has been casting about for new friends. In West Africa, Nigeria's new friends include Chad, Niger, Liberia and Burkina Faso — all countries which count for very little in international affairs and diplomacy, and all of which are to a large extent dependent on Nigeria. Even in the sub-region, countries such as Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire with stable civilian polities are giving Nigeria a wide berth. Further afield, Nigeria is courting such countries as Libya, Iraq, Iran, North Korea and China. But the truth of the matter is that, with the possible exception of China, those countries have little or nothing to offer Nigeria — either politically or economically. In actual fact, economically, they are Nigeria's competitors for foreign investments and technical assistance. Even China is hardly in a position to furnish Nigeria any financial credits or assistance. The Chinese will drive a hard bargain on any contract that Nigeria may award her. North Korea can no longer feed itself and is now begging for food aid from South Korea, which, officially, it does not even recognise. In the case of Iraq, on which there is still a UN mandatory oil sanction for its invasion of Kuwait, Saddam Hussein is still fighting for his political life and can offer Nigeria no assistance. He himself remains an outcast among his *Arab* brothers.

Besides, what do we have in common with these new 'friends?' Nothing, except the religious connection. But Nigeria is a secular state and cannot effectively use religion as an instrument of its foreign policy or diplomacy, as this will not command support or consensus domestically. Nor can Nigeria now play the Cold war game by playing off one ideological bloc against the other. The Cold war is effectively over. Military dictators can no longer use the communist 'bogy' to keep themselves in power. In fact, the new global conflict is between democracy and dictatorship, and it is a war which the latter is losing everywhere. Russia and Eastern Europe are democratising rapidly and seeking closer ties not only with the Western powers but with NATO, its military wing, as well. So there is no hiding place or future for military dictatorships anywhere, including Nigeria.

The upshot of all this is that Nigeria can only regain its international respect and influence by putting its own house in order through increasing political and economic reforms not by seeking new friends and allies among countries that are themselves totally discredited by the Western countries that are Nigeria's traditional trading partners. More than 90 per cent of the foreign investment in Nigeria is from the Western world. While it would be prudent

to diversify Nigeria's foreign trade, there is no need to cut our nose to spite our face. Nigeria still enjoys a lot of goodwill in the Western world. But it must bring itself to act in accordance with civilised norms and standards if it has to regain its position of respect and influence in the comity of nations. It must return speedily to democratic rule under the rule of law, and put an end to the violations of human rights. A strong, dynamic and effective foreign policy cannot be built on weak domestic foundations. *Ad hoc* approaches to the conduct of foreign policy must be abandoned in favour of a consistent and well-defined foreign policy objectives.

Greater use should be made of the traditional channels for the conduct of Nigeria's foreign policy and diplomacy. The foreign policy establishment in Nigeria should also seek to exert a greater influence on the conduct of Nigeria's foreign policy or diplomacy to prevent further diplomatic bunglings which will prove to be very costly for Nigeria.